

Contemporary Civil-Military Relations: Is the Republic in Danger?

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Within the last year, Richard Kohn, former chief of the Office of Air Force History, catalyzed an increasingly heated debate concerning the alleged politicization of the American military. In an article entitled "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," Kohn identifies "warning signs" indicative of the increasing alienation of the US military from its civilian leadership.¹ He lists a series of actions demonstrating that "the U.S. military is now more alienated from its civilian leadership than at any time in American history, and more vocal about it."² Kohn supports his charge by citing several examples: an Air Force major general making disparaging remarks about President Clinton during a basewide briefing, the "jeering" of a congressman during a speech to the Army's Command and General Staff College, and the alleged deliberate undermining of former secretary of defense Les Aspin by military officers in the wake of the Somalia disaster. Perhaps more seriously, Kohn suggests that the armed forces are becoming "Republicanized"—that is, dominated by supporters of a single political party.

Civil-Military Relations in Historical Perspective

Friction between the American military establishment and its civilian leadership is not a contemporary phenomenon. The debate concerning civil-military relations—in particular, the maintenance of civilian control of the military—has been a fundamental issue in the American body politic from the American Revolution to the present day. Tension between members of the military and civilian leaders existed from the founding of the United States. The Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783 involved a threatened coup by officers and soldiers of the Continental army who were disgruntled over pay and pension issues. The conspiracy, headed by Horatio Gates, the "Hero of Saratoga," foundered only after a personal appeal by George Washington.³ Although the Newburgh conspirators did not embrace an antidemocratic ideology, they were certainly willing to employ antidemocratic methods to obtain their objectives.

The initiative by the Newburgh conspirators to bring about the end of the Republic through the force of arms, although unsuccessful, demonstrated that within a significant segment of the military there existed a pervasive feeling of distrust and open disdain for civilian authorities. That the civil authorities

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reciprocated these feelings of antipathy, if not outright distrust, was clearly seen in 1783 in their protesting the efforts of Henry Knox and Baron Frederick von Steuben to found the Society of the Cincinnati, a fraternal organization for former Revolutionary War officers. Critics of the society protested that it was "inherently unrepublican" and that it "smacked of tyrannical designs."⁴

The debate surrounding the creation of a professional standing army versus the reliance on a militia of citizen-soldiers constituted another major point of contention in the early years of the Republic. The enduring myth of the effectiveness of the militia during the Revolution would later be championed by Jeffersonian Republicans intent on preventing the "subversion" of the Republic at the hands of despotic militarists. In fact, the historian Theodore Crackel argued that "the army Jefferson inherited in 1801 had a Federalist character . . . a product of the critical and intensely partisan years of 1798-1800 . . . composed almost totally of men with Federalist sympathies, many of whom had openly expressed contempt for the political philosophy of the new administration."⁵ A remarkable aspect of Jefferson's presidency involved his ability to remake a hostile "monarchical Federalist" officer corps into a republican force. Even more remarkable was the role played by Gen James Wilkinson, a staunch Federalist, in supporting Jefferson's fundamental transformation of the officer corps.⁶

Distrust of the professional military establishment found renewed expression in the twentieth century in the antimilitarist writings of proponents of both reform liberalism and business liberalism. Indeed, the proponents of business liberalism argued in the 1920s that the military was a "vestigial hold-over from a barbarous past"—an anachronism in the wake of the "war to end all wars."⁷ The philosophies of both reform and business liberalism continue to exert a considerable influence on contemporary American liberal thought. Twentieth-century American liberals have regularly sought to establish mutual exclusivity between liberal thought and military institutions. This overtly adversarial relationship found its most extreme expression in the pacifist movements prior to the First and Second World Wars and, subsequently, in the peace movement during the Vietnam War.

The Second World War proved a watershed event for the American military. The sweeping power given to members of the military in the formulation of policy coincided with the increasing participation of the military in the decision-making process. By the end of the war, the American military—in particular, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)—had become "the alter egos of the President in the conduct of war."⁸ The growth in the powers of the joint chiefs mirrored a corresponding increase in the power and importance of the military in the post-World War II world.

In his article, Kohn argues that "the roots of the crisis go back to the beginning of the Cold War, when the creation of a large, 'peacetime' standing military establishment overloaded the traditional process by which civilian control was

exercised."⁹ The opening of the atomic Pandora's box created a paradigm shift in the operational and strategic considerations of warfare and introduced an apocalyptic element to warfare, which—according to Kohn—"required civilians to invade traditional military operational authority."¹⁰ Kohn's argument mirrors the contention of Samuel Huntington concerning the changing attitude of the military toward civilian control. In his classic work, *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington argues that the members of the JCS sought to institutionalize and perpetuate the role of the joint chiefs and their access to the president in the postwar period. In the area of foreign affairs, the political leaders determined the "what," and the military leaders decided on the "how."¹¹

Kohn contends that the spectre of the "atomic genie" required civilian authorities "to take away these weapons from the military, lest operational commanders displace Congress and the President in determining whether the country would go to war."¹² The military certainly did not object to the subordination of these weapons to presidential control. Kohn, however, argues that the US-Soviet standoff "now required civilians to invade traditional military operational authority."¹³ He further details a process of bureaucratization of the military after 1950 that "increasingly blurred" the line between military and civilian counterparts. In effect, he argues that the military began to emphasize business management while its civilian counterparts became increasingly "versed in military strategy and operations."¹⁴ This transformation of civilian leadership and its increasing encroachment into operational decision making found its ultimate expression in the actions of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and his "whiz kids."

Kohn correctly emphasizes the heightened tensions between the military and its civilian leadership as a result of limited wars in Korea and Vietnam. The firing of Gen Douglas MacArthur, however, far from being a warning sign of a fundamental schism between the two, was in fact a clear reaffirmation of the primacy of civilian control. Likewise, President Lyndon B. Johnson's micromanagement of the bombing campaign in North Vietnam and his boast that the Air Force could not bomb an outhouse without his approval, although unpopular with military planners, remained an uncontested presidential prerogative. In fact, Johnson's behavior had clear historical precedents, including Abraham Lincoln's continuous involvement in strategic decision making during the Civil War.¹⁵

The collective post-traumatic stress syndrome experienced by the American military establishment in Vietnam's aftermath was a reaction in part to "McNamara's rigid decision-making methods and preemptory dismissal of military judgement."¹⁶ One clearly overstated allegation, however, is that a military-congressional alliance emerged in response to the McNamara era, spearheaded by the Republican administrations between 1963 and 1993. The stigma of military defeat did lead military and civilian defense officials to question the structure of forces and the strategy employed in Vietnam. The

ability of a defeated military to draw lessons from its past failures by changing doctrine, force structures, and technology is a vital step for ensuring success in subsequent campaigns. Harry G. Summers's *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* is one of the clearest manifestations of the postwar debate within the military in attempting to come to grips with the causes for the US defeat in Southeast Asia.¹⁷ The existence of a contemporary "stab-in-the-back" theory primarily implicating Johnson and his conduct of the war is without question. However, the wide dissemination of the argument does not, ipso facto, reflect a wide acceptance of it within the military community.¹⁸ More remarkable still was the continued acceptance of the basic premise of civilian control by the military in the very shadow of a humiliating defeat and the subsequent downsizing of American forces in the 1970s.

The debacle in Vietnam did lead to a vocal effort by senior military leaders for clearer political objectives capable of being aligned with existing military capabilities (a patently Clausewitzian concept). Indeed, the perceived failures of both American political and military policy in Vietnam proved the pivotal experience for most of the contemporary military leadership. That this concept received bipartisan support in Congress should neither surprise nor alarm Kohn. What would have merited alarm was a refusal to learn from the Asian debacle.

Additionally, Kohn's contention that during the 1970s "the professional military became politicized, abandoning its century-and-a-half tradition on nonpartisanship" is both misleading and historically debatable. Grover Cleveland narrowly lost the 1888 election to Benjamin Harrison in large part due to the reaction of former soldiers disgruntled by his veto of a measure designed to provide pensions to disabled Civil War veterans.¹⁹ Furthermore, growing historical consensus indicates that support of the military proved crucial in the presidential election of Abraham Lincoln in 1864 and of U. S. Grant in 1868.

Kohn rightly points out that the end of the draft diminished the "ideological diversity" of the officer corps. However, he neglects to credit the military's arguments against the institution of an all-volunteer force—largely a liberal initiative in response to the American experience in Vietnam. Senior military leaders, supported by civilian analysts such as Morris Janowitz, argued that an all-volunteer force forfeited the principle of "democratic participation" within the armed services.²⁰ In addition, opponents of the volunteer force feared higher operating costs, a decrease in the quality of recruits, and increased discipline problems.²¹ It is, however, significant that senior military officers provided clear support for the initiative once the civilian leadership decided to adopt the all-volunteer force.

In the face of President Jimmy Carter's "contemptuously anti-military administration," Kohn finds the emergence of a "Republican," "conservative," and "politicized military."²² Kohn fails to provide any significant evidence to support this statement. He neglects to mention the prohibitions imposed on

military members with respect to holding political office, actively campaigning in uniform, or taking advantage of one's military position to campaign. The fact that most military members are conservative is certainly no surprise. This orientation reflects the overwhelming middle-class composition of the military.²³ It is also a direct consequence of a volunteer military correspondingly likely to attract men and women imbued with conservative values and, oftentimes, family traditions of armed service. Indeed, over 22 percent of the last five entering classes of the United States Air Force Academy were either sons or daughters of a retired or active duty military parent.²⁴ Again, the implied pejorative associated with the "Republicanization" of the military is unsupported by statistical evidence and plays to the spectre of an illusory military power-play, à la *Seven Days in May*.

The renewed emphasis on increasing military capability during the 1980s was less a testament to the rising power of the military community than a reflection of a fundamental *political* objective of the "Reagan Revolution." It is equally clear that the military benefited from the Reagan buildup and was not averse to taking full advantage of the opportunities offered during the Reagan and Bush presidencies. The buildup of the military did not, however, take place in a vacuum. President Reagan's request for increased military spending in the 1980s required broad-based congressional support. The willingness of members of Congress to support the president's military program reflected in large part a perception of the "mandate" the American people demonstrated in Reagan's overwhelming election victories.²⁵

The Colin Powell Argument

Kohn is particularly harsh in his criticism of Gen Colin Powell, former chairman of the JCS (CJCS), for his "intrusion into foreign policy" and for "reversing the relationship between the national goals and military means, turning the age-old Clausewitzian formula about war being an extension of policy on its head."²⁶ There is no doubt that General Powell's experience in Vietnam influenced his views on the necessity for clear political objectives and the use of "overwhelming force."²⁷ Additionally, Powell's earlier experience as head of the National Security Agency (NSA) involved him, by definition, in the policy-making process. Support or advocacy of proposed foreign policy initiatives was an inherent element of Powell's position within the NSA. The final decision concerning a proposed course of action, however, always rested with civilian authority, namely the commander in chief.

With his appointment as CJCS, Powell inherited a position vastly strengthened by the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which mandated the extension of the role and power of the chairman within the joint chiefs. In fact, "Powell was empowered by Goldwater-Nichols to give his military opinion to the President, no matter if the Chiefs agreed with it or not. That made the Chairman, *the* military adviser to the President in fact, not just in theory"

(emphasis in original).²⁸ It did not, however, restrict or limit the final authority of the president.

Kohn criticizes Powell's efforts in the fall of 1989 to proceed "without any authorization from superiors" in developing "a set of concepts designed to reconfigure the entire military establishment . . . a new national strategy and significantly reduced and revamped military services."²⁹ The implication that it is inappropriate for America's senior military leadership to consider force restructuring in the face of changing defense commitments is patently ludicrous. Abundant examples exist involving the participation of military members in the process of remolding forces in consonance with changing national strategy objectives. For example, Gen George Marshall told President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the start of the Second World War that the political/military goal of American involvement had to include unconditional surrender of the enemy and the destruction of his military capability.³⁰ Powell's formulation of a national strategy blueprint does not "turn Clausewitz on his head." Rather, it recognizes the role of military leadership in offering suggestions for military reform. Military officers cross the line when they attempt to achieve direct control over, or usurp, the constitutionally guaranteed powers of civilian leadership in the policy-making process.

This concept of civilian control of the military finds expression in Huntington's discussion of a Clausewitzian dictum that "war does not have its own logic and purpose. The soldier must always be subordinate to the statesman." In fact, Huntington accepts the Clausewitzian contention that misguided or self-serving policy on the part of the civilian leaders "does not concern the military man."³¹ Huntington's contention, however, does not necessitate the exclusion of the military from the initial policy formulation but demands military obedience in support of the final decision of civilian policymakers.

Kohn is correct to criticize Powell's op-ed article in the *New York Times* concerning his opposition to American action in Bosnia. The general's public advocacy in that newspaper and in *Foreign Affairs* of his views for a new national strategy in the wake of the cold war is problematic. As CJCS, Powell did not surrender his First Amendment rights; however, he acted inappropriately in preempting the political decision-making process. Direct entry of military officers into the arena of public discourse should occur only after their resignation or withdrawal from military service. The fact that President Clinton had not taken the oath of office is a legalistic point.

Powell's public advocacy, although inappropriate, can most probably be traced to his previous role in the policy-making process during the Bush presidency. In addition, the fact that the 1992 elections had concentrated on domestic policy at the expense of foreign policy was certain to cause concern within a military establishment facing cataclysmic change and restructuring. The perceived lack of foreign policy expertise within the Clinton White House, whether accurate or

not, certainly played a role in Powell's decision to publish his views on the Bosnian situation.

Powell's tenure as CJCS can be seen from two very different perspectives. Kohn describes Powell as "the most powerful military leader since George C. Marshall . . . and the most political since Douglas MacArthur," a man who contravened the traditions of civil military relations as they had existed since the advent of the Republic.³² Was Powell the exception to the rule, a man who became accustomed to the formulation and exercise of political authority? Or is it possible to see Colin Powell as representing a new breed of American military planners? In a world in which the US military faces taskings from coalition warfare in the Gulf, limited air strikes in Bosnia, and humanitarian assistance in Somalia and Rwanda, perhaps it is time to recognize that the role of the CJCS has in fact become a political position, which is "simply a function of the complex modern world that chairmen operate in—a world in which military issues are inseparable from geopolitical and domestic ones."³³ The contemporaneity of the events surrounding Powell's tenure as CJCS prohibits a definitive assessment of his impact on the office or its future role. It is clear, however, that the chairman's role is still evolving and that the debate will continue

Conclusion

Forty years ago, Huntington described the inherent conflict present between the "functional and societal imperatives" of civil-military relations. He argued that

*one of the more basic and obvious facts of our time is that changes in technology and international politics have combined to make security the final goal of policy rather than its starting assumption. The functional imperative can no longer be ignored. Previously the primary question was: what pattern of civil-military relations is most compatible with American liberal democratic values? Now this has been supplanted by the more important issue: what pattern of civil-military relations will best maintain the security of the American nation?*³⁴

Huntington clearly identified the intrinsic dichotomy between a standing professional military and its relationship to American liberal philosophy. It is a dichotomy that continues to produce impassioned defense on both sides.

In the end, the framers of the Constitution successfully integrated a standing military capable of defending the Republic against enemies, both foreign and domestic. The professional military of today—like the soldiers of the early Republic—remains strongly rooted in the concept of the subordination of the military to civilian control.³⁵ The ultimate irony, perhaps, is that the conservatism of the military, so stridently criticized in liberal philosophy, acts as the very

bulwark that ensures the continued adherence of the military to the concept of civilian control. Marcus Antony does not stand outside the gates of Rome—there is no danger to the Republic. □

Notes

1. Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," *The National Interest*, Spring 1994, 3.
2. Ibid.
3. James K. Martin and Mark E. Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 186-94.
4. Ibid., 203.
5. Theodore J. Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army: Political and Social Reform of the Military Establishment, 1801-1809* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 180.
6. Ibid., 181.
7. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1957), 289-90.
8. Ibid., 333.
9. Kohn, 4.
10. Ibid., 5.
11. Huntington, 336, 342.
12. Kohn, 5.
13. Ibid.
14. Kohn, 5.
15. For a complete discussion of Lincoln's role in strategic planning during the Civil War, see T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).
16. Kohn, 6.
17. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982).
18. This myth appears far more frequently in the writings of civilian historians with reference to the Vietnam War. See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983).
19. Richard E. Welch, Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 97; and Henry J. Ford, *The Cleveland Era, The Chronicle of America Series* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1919), 154.

20. Morris Janowitz, "Volunteer Armed Forces and Military Purposes," *Military Review*, July 1972, 15-22.
21. Jack R. Butler, "The All-Volunteer Armed Force—Its Feasibility and Implications," *Parameters*, Spring-Summer 1972, 17-29; and "A Volunteer Army Cannot Be Recruited 'On the Cheap,'" *Armed Forces Journal*, June 1972, 44-46.
22. Kohn, 7.
23. The preponderantly middle-class makeup of the US officer corps dates from Jefferson's military reforms at the turn of the nineteenth century. See Crackel, 182.
24. US Air Force Academy admissions office, Colorado Springs, Colo.
25. See John Kenneth White, *The New Politics of Old Values* (Hanover, N. H.: University Press of New England, 1988).
26. Kohn, 11-12.
27. Howard Means, *Colin Powell: Soldier/Statesman, Statesman/Soldier* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1992), 293.
28. *Ibid.*, 300-301.
29. Kohn, 9.
30. *Ibid.*, 303.
31. Huntington, 57-58.
32. Kohn, 9.
33. Means, 264.
34. Huntington, 3.
35. *Ibid.*, 205-8.

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